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## ABSTRACT

This paper builds upon the "Review of Research and Other Related Evidence" that was commissioned for the government of the United Kingdom's National Literacy Strategy and also upon a subsequent review of international research evidence on children's writing. The paper suggests how "synergy" (combined effect) may be created by linking previously diverse research areas to established thinking in literacy education, to inform policy and practice. It states that synergy reflects the gains from considering what Declan Kibberd referred to at the beginning of the conference as "not either...or..." but "both...and...." Four research areas are discussed in the paper: school effectiveness research; reading process research; overseas reading pedagogy research; and writing research. The paper suggests that the National Literacy Strategy may be seen as an example of international research and scholarship influencing policy and practice in a distinctly productive way (see also Beard and Willcocks, 2001). Contains 45 references. (NKA)

## Diversity and Synergy?

The International Context of the English Literacy Strategy

Paper presented at the 12th European Conference on Reading  
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## Diversity and Synergy?

### The International Context of the English Literacy Strategy

#### Introduction

This paper builds upon the Review of Research and Other Related Evidence that was commissioned for the UK government's National Literacy Strategy (Beard, 1999a; see also Beard, 2000b and c) and also upon a subsequent review of international research evidence on children's writing (Beard, 2000a). The paper will suggest how 'synergy' (combined effect) may be created by linking previously diverse research areas to established thinking in literacy education, in order to inform policy and practice. Synergy reflects the gains from considering what Declan Kiberd referred to at the beginning of the conference as 'not "either...or..."', but "both...and..."'. Four research areas will be discussed: school effectiveness research; reading process research; overseas reading pedagogy research and writing research.

#### The National Literacy Strategy

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was implemented in English primary schools (5-11 year olds) in 1998. Its main aim is to raise literacy standards by encouraging schools to use a combination of teaching approaches derived from an international review of effective practice undertaken by a Literacy Task Force (LTF, 1997 a and b). This combination is brought together in a daily 'literacy hour', comprising whole class and group teaching and independent work. Specific teaching methods include: shared reading and writing; guided reading and writing; and plenary sessions for whole class review, reflection and consolidation. The teaching is based on a Framework for Teaching, comprising termly objectives (based on the English National Curriculum), structured at text, sentence and word levels. The NLS also encourages reading to the class, children's individual reading and extended writing (DfEE, 1998; see also Beard, 1999b). The NLS is underpinned by a national target that; by 2002, 80% of 11 year olds should reach the standard 'expected for their age' in English (Level 4) in the National Curriculum tests. The proportion reaching this standard in 1996 was 57%. The NLS has been held up by international authorities on educational change as the most ambitious large-scale strategy of educational reform witnessed since the 1960s (Fullan, 2000).

## School effectiveness research

The NLS reflects several key implications of school effectiveness research. School effectiveness is generally gauged by the further progress which pupils make than might be expected from consideration of the school's intake. The measures are normally in basic subjects especially reading and numeracy, and examinations.

School effectiveness research was drawn upon in both reports from the Literacy Task Force (LTF, 1997a and b). The Task Force contained two authorities in the field, Michael Barber and David Reynolds. Both have highlighted the tensions between British teaching practices and research findings on effectiveness including issues by unnecessarily complex teaching arrangements (e.g. Barber, 1997; Reynolds, 1992). This concern has also continued to be expressed in reports of inspection evidence (e.g. OFSTED, 1997).

English primary schools have for many years been influenced by notions of 'good practice' that have been summed up by what Robin Alexander has described as 'multiple curriculum focus in teaching sessions, with different groups working in different curriculum areas and the kinds of teacher-pupil interaction associated with a commitment to discovery learning (Alexander, 1992 p.143). Alexander notes that a feature of such approaches is often that 'the good tends to be asserted but seldom demonstrated' (Alexander, 1992, p. 180).

Two particular meta-analyses (research syntheses) on school effectiveness were singled out by the Literacy Task Force (LTF, 1997b); those by Jaap Sheerens (1992 and Bert Creemers (1994). The following extract from Sheerens' analyses identifies a number of factors that, according to research and inspection evidence, were relatively uncommon in English primary schools before the advent of the NLS.

Sheerens (1992) identifies two characteristics of school effectiveness that have 'multiple empirical research confirmation':

### *structured teaching*

- making clear what has to be learnt
- dividing material into manageable units
- teaching in a well-considered sequence
- using material in which pupils make use of hunches and prompts
- regular testing for progress
- giving immediate feedback

### *effective learning time*

This factor is partly related to the first, in that whole class teaching can often be superior to individualized teaching because in the latter the teacher has to divide attention in such a way that the net result per pupil is lower. Other aspects of effective teaching time are 'curricular emphasis', related to the time spent on certain subjects, and the need to inspire, challenge and praise so as to stimulate the motivation to learn and thus indirectly to increase net learning time.

Thus the combined effect of bringing together school effectiveness research and literacy and education underlined the likely value of more sustained attention to literacy, through a limited focus in lessons, greater emphasis on whole class and group teaching and the use of various interactive shared teaching techniques.

### Reading process research

If generic research on school effectiveness partly predicted the success of the NLS, so did findings from reading research, especially that concerned with the reading process. There is evidence of another substantial tension in recent years: between the model of reading assumed by influential British teacher education publications and the conclusions from experimental research. These conclusions have been recently marked by an unusual consensus in what has often been a contentious area of investigation. Recent psychological research indicates that what characterises reading fluency is context-independent word recognition and context-dependent comprehension. This is well discussed by Charles Perfetti (1995). UK literacy education has, for many years, been disproportionately influenced by a model that is in some ways diametrically opposite (e.g. Brooks et al., 1992; Beard and Oakhill, 1994).

For some years fluent reading was held to be a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' by some influential writers. This view assumed that fluent reading was characterised by increasing use of contextual cues and minimal use of visual cues (Goodman, 1967; Smith 1971). In the last twenty years a great deal of evidence has been put forward in support of the opposite view (see also Beard 1995; Stanovich, 2000).

Recent research-based models of fluent reading suggest that reading involves the use of sources of contextual, comprehension, visual and phonological information which are simultaneously interactive, issuing and accommodating to and from each other

(Rumelhart and McClelland, 1986; Seidenberg and McClelland, 1989; Adams, 1990; Reid, 1993; Stanovich and Stanovich, 1995; Perfetti, 1995). These findings are reflected in the NLS 'searchlights' model of reading, which draws attention to four main cue systems: contextual understanding, grammatical knowledge, word recognition and phonic knowledge. The model also allows for the fact that beginning readers may draw disproportionately on one or more of these cues systems until reading fluency is established.

### Overseas reading pedagogy research

Inspection evidence and curriculum development research have also highlighted several other aspects where British primary education may have been out of step with thinking in other countries. Early reading in English primary schools has been largely taught by individualised methods in which the structure of commercial materials was often very influential. There was little use of regular direct class or group teaching of reading, even when the design of commercial materials suggested it (OFSTED, 1996c). As an earlier HMI report had pointed out, for most 5-7 year old pupils, reading to the teacher was often the most frequent experience of one-to-one teaching... often less than five minutes per pupil. Schools generally provided too few opportunities for the pupils to see and hear the text of a story simultaneously (HMI, 1992, p. 16).

This state of affairs contrasted with the shared reading approaches which have been developed in New Zealand. In these, teacher and pupils simultaneously read aloud a large format text. The approach has been especially promoted in the writing of Don Holdaway (1979, 1982). He was particularly interested in developing methods which resembled the visual intimacy with print which characterises the pre-school book experience of parents reading with their children. Research suggests that, before the National Literacy Strategy, large format texts were not widely used for teaching reading in English primary schools (e.g. Cato, et al., 1992; Ireson et al, 1995; Wragg et al., 1998; see also Beard, 2000c).

There was a similar story in relation to the teaching of skills for dealing with information texts. According to inspection evidence, these were taught rather patchily and sometimes left to chance (OFSTED, 1996a). Links between reading and writing were often not directly made (OFSTED, 1996b). This indicated that much might be gained from the approaches developed from Australian genre theory. The distinctive features of various genres are used firstly to raise awareness about their structures, then to model

them in shared reading and writing and eventually to tackle them in collaborative or independent writing (Martin, 1989; Callaghan and Rothery, 1988; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; see also Lewis and Wray, 1995).

Thus the NLS has used reading pedagogy research to create a framework whose synergy is created by combining text level teaching (including various literary and informational genres) with attention to sentence level features and the letters and sounds that form the foundations of the alphabetic writing system.

### Writing research

Finally, what research perspectives might contribute to a global synergy in the effective teaching of writing? There are growing concerns about writing performance in English schools. In annual national test results the writing scores have consistently lagged behind the others. In 2000 the annual percentage of pupils achieving national expectations was only 55% (compared with 83% in reading), with boys performing much less well than girls.

Recent years have seen greater attention being paid to purpose and audience in writing. There has also been increased interest in the process of writing. However, some significant international research findings remain under-exploited. Meta-analyses of research have identified four broad approaches to the teaching of writing (Hillocks, 1986; 1995). The most widely used, 'presentational', approach (setting tasks and marking outcomes) appears to be the least effective. It involves telling pupils what is strong or weak in writing performance, but it does not provide opportunities for them to learn procedures for putting this knowledge to work. In contrast, 'guided writing' teaching approaches have been gauged to be over four times more effective than the presentational approach and two or three times more effective than 'process' or individualised approaches. This may be because guided writing presents new forms, models and criteria and facilitates their use in different writing tasks.

The teaching of guided writing approaches can also be enhanced by the use of shared writing, where the teacher and pupils construct a text together. The value of shared writing was underlined by experimental studies which indicate that pupils (and teachers) need to be made aware of the full extent of the composing process (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993). Again, according to inspection evidence, shared and guided teaching approaches have not been widely used in the teaching of writing in the UK until recently (OFSTED, 2000).

## Conclusion

In relation to national standards in England, the annual percentages of eleven year olds achieving at least the standard expected for their age in English (Level 4) since the implementation of the NLS are shown below. The annual percentages of eleven year olds achieving Level 4 or above in English has risen as follows:

1996	57%	1997	63%	1998	65%	1999	71%	2000	75%
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Two qualifying comments need to be made about the results reported above.

1. The National Tests are externally set and externally marked. They also include separate teacher assessments by the pupils' own teachers: these have recorded slightly lower scores in the 1999 and 2000 (68% and 70% respectively, although still maintaining a rising trend of pupil performance since 1996).

2. The English National Tests scores are composites, made up of performance data in speaking and listening, reading and writing.

This paper has suggested that the National Literacy Strategy may be seen as an example of international research and scholarship influencing policy and practice in a distinctly productive way (see also Beard and Willcocks, 2001). Papers such as this will now in turn place the broader lessons from the INLS at the disposal of researchers and scholars elsewhere in the world. The NLS itself may in time offer 'other ways of seeing'.



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